

# Simmons gets panel's OK for Coast Guard museum

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Associated Press

A U.S. House committee has revived the Coast Guard's effort to create a new museum in New London despite ongoing concerns about the city's use of eminent domain to acquire the land.

The House Transportation Committee agreed by voice vote Wednesday to allow the Coast Guard commandant to establish a national museum on federal land "located at, or in close proximity to" the Coast Guard Academy in New London.

The measure still faces an uncertain future, however, since it must be passed by the House and there is no effort in the Senate to pass similar legislation.

The provision, pushed by Rep.

Robert R. Simmons, R-2nd District, was dumped the last time he tried to get it approved because of concerns over cost and the fact that the city took the land, located in the Fort Trumbull area of the city, by eminent domain.

But on Wednesday Simmons worked out the problems with Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., by changing some of the wording and requiring that the commandant report back to Congress on the costs. Simmons said it is important for the Coast Guard to have its own museum, which could serve as an educational resource.

"This legislation is carefully crafted to be neutral on any issue relative to land," said Simmons. "That's a matter that's in the courts, and I'm confident the courts will provide all parties with a fair judgment."

He said the homeowners are entitled to their full legal process, but Congress should not interfere in the land dispute.

And, Simmons said, the committee should act now, rather than wait until after the courts rule later this year, because adding the provision to the Coast Guard authorization bill was easier than trying to pass a separate, individual bill later.

The Institute for Justice, a Washington, D.C.-based law firm, filed a lawsuit nearly three years ago against the city and the New London Development Corp. on behalf of Fort Trumbull property owners fighting to keep their properties.

Scott Bollock, a lawyer with the institute, said Wednesday that he was encouraged by the changes to the language of the amendment that adds congressional oversight to the museum project.

"It gives property owners and people concerned about the abuse of eminent domain a vehicle to address those concerns," Bollock said.